

# First Congregational Church Weekly Newsletter

East Longmeadow, MA

November 19, 2025

PASTORAL REFLECTION Reverend Thomas Hawkins



## GRACE AND GRATITUDE

Last week there was an uproar in the media when families at a military housing complex near Tyndall Air Force Base in Florida received a written reminder of the rules for holiday decorating: No spray-canned “snow” fogging up the windows. No glowing red and green lights around the front door. No sleds, no reindeer, no twinkling lights. No Santas clinging to the roof as if they have missed the sleigh. And under no circumstances should the Christmas decorations elbow their way in before Thanksgiving. “If you currently have Yuletide décor present on the outside of your home, please remove it,” the manager wrote.

It sounds like something dreamed up by the Grinch who stole Christmas. On the other hand, I have some sympathy with the sentiment behind the policy. Please. Let’s just have one holiday at a time. Back in late September I went into Lowe’s looking for light bulbs and was greeted along the main aisle by Christmas trees and elves on my left. On my right was a row of 12-foot free-standing Halloween ghouls for sale. It wouldn’t surprise me if CVS isn’t already putting Easter decorations on their shelves this week. I understand the commercial need to push out products for the next big holiday season as soon as possible to capture the clientele. Unfortunately, it means we are never really present to whatever holiday we are celebrating. Everything runs together into a jumble of images and celebrations. Like having Baby Jesus on our front lawn guarded by jack-o-lanterns and 12-foot ghouls that moan and move.

I personally am fond of Thanksgiving; and I’m not alone. William Sloan Coffin, former Yale chaplain and later preaching minister at Manhattan’s Riverside Church once said he could really get into Thanksgiving, which is the only victimless national holiday “if you can overlook several million turkeys.”

I like the bright colors of a cornucopia stuffed with gourds, grapes, apples, and nuts. I wait all year for a slice of the pie I remember my grandmother only making at Thanksgiving, whose recipe I now use to make it for our family. I like those politically incorrect ceramic pilgrims that belonged to my mother but now grace our Thanksgiving table. Nonetheless, Thanksgiving seems to be the holiday we rush past so quickly that – like those proverbial small towns around our nation – if we blink we miss it. The heavy-hitters for consumer spending are Halloween’s candy, costumes, and decorations along with the Christmas season’s frenzy of gift-buying, decorations, and holiday parties. (The highest month of the year for purchases of alcohol and spirits is unsurprisingly December.) Between these commercial heavyweights is the modestly priced fourth Thursday in November.

Maybe there’s a deeper reason our society focuses only briefly on Thanksgiving, however. Gathered around our tables overflowing with turkey, cranberry sauce and whipped potatoes, we are asked to pause and reflect on the things for which we are grateful. And gratitude does not necessarily come naturally to us. Gratitude is more than remembering to mutter “thank you” in some small gesture of politeness. It is a way of looking at ourselves and the world around us. It is not a means to another end such as boosting our mood or acquiring better health. As one article I read on gratitude put it, “Boost Your Health with a Dose of Gratitude.” Gratitude is instead an end in itself.

Gratitude is, after all, at the very heart of our faith. Gratitude is the basic human response to the goodness and mercy of God and to God’s undeserved and unconditional love, which we call “grace.” Grace and gratitude are two sides of a single experience. At the heart of Christian teaching is not guilt, as we have

sometimes been taught. Nor is it duty and obligation, as we occasionally conclude. The heart of Christian faith is grace and gratitude: pure and simple gratitude for God's grace, gratitude because all of life is a gift we do not earn but are given each and every day.

The word "thanks" or "thanksgiving" appears 117 times in the bible. "Gratitude" or "grateful" occurs 157 times. Throughout the Good Book gratitude is described as a way of looking at the world that is not dependent on having an abundance of things for which to give thanks. It is the capacity to see beyond one's current challenges, disappointments, or catastrophes and see that life is worth living. It is believing that life itself is a precious gift we receive anew each morning amid even the adversity and heartbreak that are inevitable in every life.

The heart of our Christian experience is not obligation or guilt, but grace and gratitude. Gratitude for the gift of life itself. Gratitude for the world around us. Gratitude for the people who grace and enrich our lives. It is gratitude that heals us of the ingratitude arising out of our thinking that we deserve and have earned better things than the setbacks and difficulties that visit our lives.

As Anne Lamott, the author of *Help, Thanks, Wow*, writes: "Domestic pain can be searing, and it is usually what does us in. It's almost indigestible: death, divorce, old age, drugs... violence, senility, unfaithfulness. Good luck with figuring it out. It unfolds, and you experience it, and it is so horrible and endless that you could almost give up a dozen times. But grace can be the experience of a second wind, when even though what you want is clarity and resolution, what you get is stamina and poignancy and the strength to hang on."

Thanksgiving blessings to you and yours,

Thomas

**SUNDAY WORSHIP** in the sanctuary or livestream link: <http://www.facebook.com/churchontherotary/>

### **ADVENT STUDY "Minor Players in a Big Story"**

Join Pastor Thomas for this year's Advent Study, "Minor Players in a Big Story." We'll be using familiar carols or hymns and scripture to look at some minor characters in the Christmas story: Elizabeth and Zechariah, the shepherds in the hills around Bethlehem, and King Herod.

#### **December 7 – "Struck**

#### **Speechless"**

#### **(Zechariah and Elizabeth)**

Scripture – Luke 1:5-23, 57-80

hymn –

"Blessed Be The God of Israel"

#### **December 14 – "Playing the**

#### **Victim Villain"**

Scripture – Matthew 2:1-18

Carol – "Coventry Carol"

(Lullay, Lullah)

#### **December 21 – "A Glimpse of**

#### **Heaven"**

Scripture – Luke 2:8-20

Carol – "While Shepherds

Watched Their Flocks

Each session will begin shortly after Coffee Hour at 11:15 & conclude at 12:30 p.m.

Please sign up on the poster in fellowship hall so we have an idea of the size space we need for seating!

**NO NEWSLETTER next Wednesday (11/26) do to the holiday. The NEWS will resume on December 3<sup>rd</sup>.**

## STEWARDSHIP NEWS from the Treasurer

Stewardship letters were mailed out last week. If you have not received yours, please call the church office and we can send one to you. In keeping with the times, instead of referring to “pledges”, we will refer to “Estimates of Giving”. This makes a good deal of sense because we are not asking for a contract but rather an estimate of what you think you can contribute. I hope this will make it easier to submit an estimate so that we will be better able to make an accurate budget for 2026. Please return your estimate of giving card by November 23.

Thank you

## STEWARDSHIP MESSAGE

You might have heard me chant out Two red doors, special steeple, lessons for our children and all people, with an organ, all in the center of town when I did my stewardship message.

I copied the advertisement from McDonalds. Remember this one? Two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, and onions on a sesame seed bun. Ray Krock made millions by making everything the same every time. His idea was that people liked the same food. Each time, every time. When we go into our church what would you like to see the same?

What really changes is our relationships with each other. As we get to know one another better our relationships change. Through all the things God gives us we learn and change. As we go through the stewardship drive this year remember our relationships with one another. We are all the same as members of First Congregational Church. God put us all together to do His will here on earth. Reach out to someone you haven't seen. Say hello to a friend. Introduce yourself to someone new. Reverend Hawkins sermon last week about a man without a country really reminds us that we are social creatures. We do need money to make a church run. We need volunteers to make everything go. These are the practical things. The physical things. The thing we can't forget this season is why we are all here. To be in God's care and for us to take care of all of us. Let us all remember the relationships we have formed here. How they are the same each time but still evolve. This year's theme message describes the parable of the inn keeper. What role will you have in it? Running the inn? Caring for the wounded? Simply giving money?

Peace to all

## PRAYER FOR THE WEEK

We give you thanks, Creative and Creating God, for the beauty of the earth around us, especially for that comes forth from the earth to nourish our bodies and the glory of sunrise and sunset, the waters of river and sea, the textures of leaves and flowers around us. We are grateful too for the human relationships that sustain our lives - our families, friends and neighbors. We are thankful too for all who have labored for a fairer and freer world for us to inhabit. Help us not to live not by fear but by grace and gratitude. Amen.



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